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ABSTRACT

In recent characterizations of reading and writing, the distinctions melt into each other so that one definition serves for both: both are the creation of meaning. In the act of creating meaning, readers become writers and writers become readers. While reading is primarily receptive and writing is primarily productive, fluency in reading is very much a product of productive abilities, and fluency in writing is very much a product of receptive abilities. Studies by cognitive psychologists and psycholinguists show the effect of predisposition and context on interpretation, and demonstrate that the integration of ideas takes place during reading: memory is not a matter of straight information retrieval, but instead depends on constructive processes that occur during reading. The differences between speech and writing suggest the need for writers to assume a receptive stance. Reading one's own text as if a stranger is a way to determine whether a context and the nonverbal information contained in gesture and intonation have been conveyed. Probably good readers and writers move back and forth between these two aspects unconsciously. Less fluent readers and writers need experiences that will demonstrate the undersides of reading and writing. Approaches that force a reader to move into the writer's territory and the writer into the reader's territory are a first step. Giving readers incomplete texts and asking them to predict the content and structure of what is missing, or presenting writers with their own work in modified cloze format are two suggestions for helping students experience the productive and receptive qualities of both reading and writing. (HTH)

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Fostering Fluent Readers and Writers

The growing body of literature about the interrelationships between reading and writing has a contribution to make to those of us who are trying to develop our students' reading and writing abilities. While reading and writing were always seen as related activities, the focus was often on their differences. Page's(1974) characterization of reading and writing as inverse processes is typical. He calls them inverse because in writing, the goal is to get meaning into print while in reading, the goal is to extract meaning from print. His metaphor for reading and writing as two sides of a coin leads to the following description of the processes: the writer goes from knowledge to meaning to deep structure to conceived surface structur e to graphemic surface structure while the reader begins with the graphemic surface structure and proceeds to perceived surface structure to deep structure to meaning to knowledge.

In more recent characterizations of reading and writing, the distinctions melt into each other so that one definition serves for both. Both are the creation of meaning(Birnbaum, 1981). I would like to argue that in the act of creating meaning, readers become writers and writers become readers. In Page's characterization, reading is primarily receptive while writing is primarily productive. For those of us who are fluent in reading, I suggest, our fluency is very much a product of productive abilities and for those of us who are fluent in writing, our fluency is very much a product of receptive abilities. As readers and writers, we make an imaginative leap into each other's territories.

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Reading as Constructive

Gibson and Levin's description of mature reading reflects the productive quality:

> A skilled reader is very selective. Sometimes he skims, sometimes he skips, and sometimes he concentrates. He plans his strategy ahead, suiting it to his interests, to the material, and to his purpose.... He doesn't read in the pure sense of performing a unique process composed of decoding and comprehending; he thinks and remembers..., and he constantly relates what his eye is dwelling on to what came before, what will come next, and to his own experience. (p. 438)

But it is not just from introspection and observation that the productive view of reading emerges. Cognitive psychologists and psycholinguists have become very interested in reading and have done many studies which demonstrate the constructive nature of reading. I will briefly describe two.

The first examines the role of expectations and prior knowledge on comprehension. Anderson, Reynolds, Scallert, and Goetz(1976)gave students in a physical education class and a music education class two ambiguous passages. The first could be interpreted either as a convict considering escape or as a wrestler trying to break his opponent's hold, and the second could be seen as a group of people getting together to play cards or to rehearse a woodwind ensemble.

Results from multiple choice questions developed to determine students' interpretations showed the effect of predisposition and context on interpretation. Physical education students interpreted the first passage as a wrestling match 64% of the time and music students made this interpretation only 28% of the time. Music students

interpreted the second passage as a woodwind rehearsal 71% of the time while physical education students made this interpretation only 29% of the time. Clearly, what we bring to text functions as a filter for what is there. Thus, our interpretations reflect ourselves as well as the text.

The second experiment looks at what we remember from what we read. Bransford and Franks(1971) presented students with a bunch of related sentences, all based on a master sentence. An example of a master sentence is, "The ants in the kitchen ate the sweet jelly which was on the table." This master sentence itself was not at first shown to the students. Instead, they were shown sentences such as the following which were interspersed with other sentences on different topics.

The ants ate the sweet jelly that was on the table.
The ants in the kitchen ate the sweet jelly.
The ants were in the kitchen.

After a five minute break, students were presented with a number of sentences, some of which they has just seen and others which contained ideas from the sentences they had just seen but were expressed in different ways. Their task was to distinguish between familiar and new sentences, rating their confidence on a five point scale. Interestingly, students were most confident of having seen the master sentence--a sentence which in fact they had not seen. This demonstrates that integration of ideas takes place during reading, and that memory is not a matter of straight information retrieval. Instead, it depends on constructive processes that occur during reading.

Writing as Receptive

The differences between speech and writing suggest the need for writers to assume a receptive stance. In

speech, the speaker uses intonation, gesture, and facial expressions to communicate shades of meaning and responses from the listener allow for necessary clarifications or detours. Also context carries much of the burden of communication.

For the writer, however, it's a different story. As Hirsch(1977) points out, "Written speech...must normally secure its meaning in some future time, in varied and unpredictable situations, and for the understanding of a varied and unpredictable audience"(p. 21). In order to achieve this difficult goal, the writer must use words to convey the non-verbal information contained in intonation, gesture, and facial expression and must provide the reader with the needed context. Reading his or her text with the eyes of a stranger is a way to determine if sufficient context is provided, if the non-verbal content comes through. Thus, it is through the exigencies of revision that a dynamic interaction between reading and writing takes place in the composing process. It is in revising that the writer becomes a reader and determines if he or she receives what is intended from the text.

Fostering Fluent Reading and Writing

No doubt, one can read without being aware of its productive nature and write, without being aware of its receptive nature. Probably, though, good readers and writers move back and forth between these two aspects unconsciously. Less fluent readers and writers need experiences that will demonstrate the undersides of reading and writing. Shaughnessy (1977) supports this view when she suggests that for the underprepared college student

> it is only when he can observe himself as a reader and imagine that a writer is behind the print of the page that he understands his own situation as a writer. (p. 223)

How can we demonstrate the undersides of reading and writing to our underprepared students? Approaches that force a reader to move into the writer's territory and that force a writer to become a reader are a first step. For reading, giving student incomplete texts--be they part of a paragraph, an essay, or a textbook chapter--and asking them to predict the content and the structure of what's missing will force the reader to assume a predictive stance. In terms of writing, presenting students with their own work--be it an essay, a test response or a reaction paper-- in a modified cloze format[1] will show writers the necessity for providing sufficient context, for anticipating the reader.

These are only two suggestions for helping students experience the productive and receptive quality of both reading and writing. Creative teachers can provide many more. And through repeated experiences, students will learn to make the imaginative leaps that characterize fluent reading and writing.

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[1] While a cloze format specifies deleting every tenth word, for the purposes of this exercise, determinations should be made with regard to content in terms of appropriate words to delete.

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